

EGYPT AND THE PRIMORDIAL TRADITION

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Questions have often arisen regarding the origins of Rosicrucianism. Although a consensus of researchers places its historical beginnings in the seventeenth century, we are of the opinion that the genesis of this movement dates from much farther back. Such was the belief of the German alchemist Michael Maier. In his work *Silentium Post Clamores* (1617), he described Rosicrucianism as having arisen from the Egyptians, the Brahmans, the mysteries of Eleusis and Samothrace, the Magi of Persia, the Pythagoreans, and the Arabs. Several years after the publication of the *Fama Fraternalitatis* (1614) and the *Confessio Fraternalitatis* (1615), Irenaeus Agnostus, in *Chlypeum veritatis* (*The Shield of Truth*, 1618), felt no hesitation in declaring Adam to be the first representative of the Order. The Rosicrucian manifestos likewise made reference to the same source: “Our philosophy has nothing new in it; it conforms to what Adam inherited after the Fall, and what Moses and Solomon practiced.”¹

The Primordial Tradition

Adam, Egypt, Persia, the Greek sages, and the Arabs were conjured up for good reason by Michael Maier. He alluded to a concept that was very widespread before the coming of Rosicrucianism. This concept—the Primordial Tradition—first appeared in the Renaissance,² especially after the rediscovery of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, a group of mysterious texts attributed to an Egyptian priest, Hermes Trismegistus. From

him, this idea of a primordial revelation, of which Egypt was the cradle, would have considerable repercussions.

Our intention is not to describe Egyptian esotericism in full, but rather to indicate how this heritage was transmitted. The route connecting Egypt to the West is long and offers a varied landscape. We will not discuss all of its details, because this description

would occupy an entire volume. However, certain salient points will allow us to understand Rosicrucian origins. While engaging in this undertaking it is necessary to follow a trustworthy guide, and Hermes appears to be the character most noted in the ancient writings. Indeed, the history and myths relating to this individual are particularly rich in information concerning our purpose at hand.

Since antiquity, Egypt’s civilization has been much admired. Its mystery schools, which acted both as universities and monasteries, were the guardians of its wisdom. These schools experienced a distinctive flowering under the rule of Akhnaton (1353–1336 BCE), especially after he introduced the concept of monotheism. The Egyptian religion is particularly intriguing because of its mysterious cults. Although Hermes had some of his origins in Egypt, in the god Thoth, he was primarily a Greek god. He was the son of Zeus and of the nymph Maia. The Greeks considered him the god of shepherds, thieves, merchants, and travelers. He was also the inventor of astronomy, weights and measures, the musical scale, the art of



Michael Maier, *Symbola aureae mensae duodecim nationum*, 1617.

gymnastics, and the cultivation of olive trees. Most of all he was the messenger of Zeus and the shepherd who guided the dead toward the world of Hades. His attributes were a caduceus and winged sandals.

In the Egyptian pantheon, Thoth enjoyed a special illustriousness. He was shown as an ibis-headed man or as a baboon (cf. the *Book of the Dead*). Equipped with a palette, reed, and papyrus, he was always ready to transcribe the words of Re. He was the very epitome of a scribe; he was described as the inventor of hieroglyphs. Thoth was the protector of scribes, the teacher of medicine, astronomy, and the arts. He knew the secrets of magic; he was the initiator. On the statue of Amenhotep, son of Hapu, a high official and favorite of Amenhotep III (ca. 1360 BCE), it is written: “. . . but into the divine book, I have been initiated. Of Thoth, I have seen glory, and among mystery, I introduced myself.”

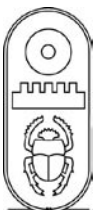
In a period as far distant as the Old Kingdom (2705–2180 BCE), Thoth was already described as the messenger of the gods, a characteristic he preserved when passing into the Greek world in the guise of Hermes. In his capacity of judge, he stood between Seth and Horus. He was the protector of the eye of Horus.

In the Middle Kingdom (1987–1640 BCE), he personified wisdom. He was particularly honored in Hermopolis, and the priests of this city attributed to him the *Book of the Two Ways*, a text which described the voyage to the afterlife. The inscriptions found in the sarcophagi of this period also mention a “divine book of Thoth.” At the beginning of this period, Thoth appeared as the writer of sacred writings, the all-knowing teacher, the one who knew the secret magical rites. It is also reported that the sacred texts were found at the foot of his statue. This symbolic theme is found much later in the story describing the discovery of the tomb of Hermes Trismegistus by Apollonius of Tyana. In the *Book of the Dead*, Thoth plays the role of judge when weighing the heart of the deceased.

In the New Kingdom (1540–1075 BCE), Akhnaton (1353–1336 BCE) abolished the ancient pantheon when instituting the cult of Aton. Even so, Thoth preserved certain prerogatives during the pharaoh’s reign. After the disappearance of the founder of Egyptian monotheism, Thoth regained his qualities of all-knowing sage and the teacher of secrets. During this period, writings of an occult character became important. This is undoubtedly why H. Spencer Lewis regarded Amosis, the pharaoh who introduced this period, as being the organizer of the school of initiates that later gave rise to the Rose Cross. Moreover, he thought Hermes was a sage contemporary with Akhnaton. The occult knowledge of the Egyptians was considered secret. It was transmitted by “houses of life,” sometimes called “mystery schools.”

The opinions of the specialists are divided regarding the importance of occultism and magic in the time of the pharaohs. Erik Hornung, an Egyptologist at the University of Basel, feels that too many historians have taken an overly positivist approach regarding this matter. He declares that it is “undeniable that at the beginning of the New Kingdom, at the latest, a spiritual climate propitious to the emergence of Hermetic wisdom dominated.” Emphasizing the important role of Jan Assmann, who concentrated on this subject while studying the Rameside period, he added that at present “there prevail conditions much more favorable to the discovery of Hermeticism’s possible Egyptian roots.”³

In the Late Kingdom (664–332 BCE), Thoth was considered to be the teacher of magic. A stele calls him “twice great,” and he is presented sometimes as “thrice (very) great,” or even “five times great” (cf. the *Story of Setne*). In the Ptolemaic period, the Greeks and Romans were fascinated by Hermopolis and its cult of Thoth. There developed at this time an original synthesis between the Egyptian civilization and the Hellenistic culture.



The Greeks and Egypt

Considerable evidence relates to the relationships between the sages of Greece and of Egypt. In the fifth century BCE Herodotus visited Egypt and conversed with the priests. In his history he discusses the Osirian mysteries celebrated at Sais. For him, the mysteries of Greece owed much to Egypt. Comparing the Greek and Egyptian pantheons, he observed that certain divinities of his country had their origins among the pharaohs.

There existed a strong tradition which claimed that the great sages of ancient Greece obtained knowledge from their Egyptian teachers. It was claimed that many among them were initiated into the mysteries, thus assuring the transmission of Egyptian learning into the Greek world. Among them Herodotus spoke only of Solon (ca. 640–558 BCE). In *Timaeus* and the *Critias* Plato (427–347 BCE), who himself had gone to Egypt and remained there three years, spoke of the discussions that Solon had with the Egyptian priests. In *The Republic*, he also emphasized the prestige of the Egyptian priests. Furthermore, he mentioned Thoth in the *Phaedrus*. Isocrates, a contemporary of Plato, made Egypt the source of philosophy and indicated that Pythagoras went there to be instructed. Apollonius of Rhodes (295–ca.230 BCE) claimed that Hermes, by way of his son Aithalides, was the direct ancestor of Pythagoras.

Diodorus Siculus (80–20 BCE) provided the greatest amount of information concerning the influence of Egypt upon the sages of Greece. He based this partly upon what he had gathered in his encounters with the Egyptian priests, and partly upon the *Aegyptiaca*, a work by Hecataeus of Abdera.

Diodorus stated first of all that Orpheus traveled to Egypt and was initiated into the Osirian mysteries. After returning to his homeland around the sixth century BCE, he instituted new rites that were called the Orphic mysteries. Diodorus also stated that rites observed in Eleusis by the Athenians were similar to those of the Egyptians.

Plutarch (ca. 50–ca. 125 CE) later remarked that the Orphic and Bacchic mysteries were really of Egyptian and Pythagorean origin. Diodorus also reported on the travels of Solon and of Thales of Miletus (624–548 BCE), who visited the priests and measured the pyramids. Plutarch declared that Thales brought Egyptian geometry back to Greece.

Diodorus also claimed that Thales urged Pythagoras to go to Egypt, and it was in this country that the latter conceived the concept of the migration of souls. Iamblichus later added that Pythagoras had studied in the Egyptian temples for twenty-two years, and, after having received this training, he established his own school in Crotona, Italy, and he taught what he had learned in the Egyptian mystery schools. Finally, Diodorus reported that in the fifth century Democritus (ca. 460–370 BCE), discoverer of the atom, was taught by the geometers of the pharaoh, and then initiated in the Egyptian temples.

One of Plato's followers, Eudoxus of Cnidus (ca. 405–355 BCE), a mathematician and geometer, also made the voyage to the land of the Nile. While there, he was initiated on both the scientific and spiritual levels. Pliny specified that he would report in his country some important astronomical knowledge, as those which related to the exact duration of the year (365 $\frac{1}{4}$ days). His hypothesis of homocentric spheres constituted the point of departure of traditional astronomy. Plutarch, a member of the sacerdotal college of Apollo in Delphi, where he was high priest, also sought knowledge along the banks of the Nile. While there, he was initiated by Clea, a priestess of Isis and Osiris. In his book *Isis and Osiris*, Plutarch spoke of the "works called Books of Hermes" and emphasized the importance of Egyptian astrology. He also reported that many authorities declared Isis to be the daughter of Hermes.

Thoth-Hermes

In drawing a parallel between Zoroaster and Moses, Diodorus introduced a concept that would be in considerable vogue in the

Renaissance, where he spoke of a *philosophia perennis* transmitted by way of the great sages from the beginnings of time. Beginning in the second century BCE, the Greeks claimed that Thoth had for a son Agathodemon, who himself had engendered a son named Hermes. The latter, considered to be the second Hermes, was called *Trismegistus*—that is, “Thrice-greatest.” Thus, in the third century CE the Greeks adopted Thoth, giving him the name of Hermes and describing him as *Trismegistus*—“Thrice-greatest.”

As Thoth was the teacher of speech and writing, it was natural that the Greeks made him the father of Homer, their greatest poet. In the third century CE, Heliodorus indicated that Homer was the son of Hermes and an Egyptian priest’s daughter. Eventually each era added some detail, and little by little was forged the concept which stated that Egypt was the source of wisdom and knowledge.

Alexandria

With the conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great in 333 BCE, the assimilation of the Egyptian culture by the Greek world was accelerated. The focus of this activity occurred in the city of Alexandria, founded in 331 BCE, where the waters of the Nile mixed with those of the Mediterranean. A crossroads of Egyptian, Jewish, Greek, and Christian cultures, it acted over the centuries as the intellectual center of the eastern Mediterranean. Therapeutae, Gnostics, and various other mystical movements developed around this city. Its library, enriched by more than 50,000 volumes, gathered together all of the knowledge of the era. Alexandria was also the crucible where Greco-Egyptian alchemy flourished.

The city gave birth to a new science in the form of alchemy, a continuation of ancient Egyptian practices that was transformed and revived by Greek thought. Its originality consisted of offering a concrete and universal discipline free from the grasp of religion. Hermes Trismegistus, represented by Alexandrian alchemists as being the founder of this art, became the new transmitter of the

ancient tradition. However, we should note that alchemy already existed in China and India. Among the Alexandrian alchemists, Bolos of Mendes (100 BCE) was a notable figure, often being described as the founder of Greco-Egyptian alchemy.

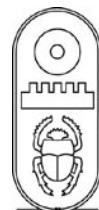
In 30 BCE, Alexandria became the capital of the Roman province of Egypt. The Romans assimilated the Greco-Egyptian Hermes with Mercury, their god of commerce and travelers. Mercury-Hermes was the messenger of the gods, the conductor, or guide of souls. Rome rapidly adopted Egypt and its cults.

The Corpus Hermeticum

Three centuries before the Christian era, texts that are now called the *Hermetica*—because their authorship is attributed to Hermes Trismegistus—began to take shape. This literature expanded considerably from the first century BCE, and in the Nile Delta region the composition of the *Hermetica* continued until the third century CE. Written in Greek, an Egyptian form of esotericism is quite apparent. Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–ca. 220 CE) spoke of the forty-two books of Hermes which the Egyptians carried about in their ceremonies. Iamblichus attributed 20,000 books to Hermes, whereas Seleucus and Manetho mentioned about 36,525.

The most celebrated, written between the first and third centuries CE, are the seventeen tracts which were gathered together under the title of *Corpus Hermeticum*.⁴ They are composed primarily of dialogues between Hermes, his son Tat, and Asclepius. The first of these treatises, *Poemandres*, discusses the creation of the world.

The *Asclepius* is also an important text as it describes the religion of the Egyptians and the magical rites they practiced for attracting cosmic powers meant to animate the statues of the gods. Finally, the fragments of *Stobaeus* constitute the third group of the *Hermetica*. These are composed of thirty-nine texts and consist of dialogues between Isis and Horus



regarding the creation of the world and the origin of souls. These texts, generally attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, claim to be translated from the Egyptian. In truth, they contain few authentic Egyptian elements. They are essentially characterized by Greek philosophy, but also by Judaism and Zoroastrianism. They do not compose a coherent whole and present numerous doctrinal contradictions.

Pax Romana

Among the Greeks the influence of Egypt was felt primarily through its literature, but among the Romans the influence took a different twist. The latter were not content to travel to the land of the pharaohs. In 30 BCE, after the suicide of Cleopatra and the conquest of Egypt by Octavian, the country became a Roman province. At the beginning of the first century CE the Romans controlled the Nile valley. They embraced its culture, and the emperor was compared to a pharaoh. The conquerors adopted certain rites of the land they had taken, and the cult of Isis found a home in Rome.

Rome adopted Egyptian architecture. Even now we can admire one of the last remnants of this era, the pyramid of Caius Cestius. Another, now vanished, was erected in the necropolis of the Vatican. The city also bristled with numerous obelisks taken from Karnak, Heliopolis, and Sais. Visitors to Rome may still admire more than ten of them. The existence of an Isiac college is attested around 80 BCE. By 105 BCE a temple consecrated to the worship of Isis was located in Pompeii. The Iseum in the Campus Martius, which included a temple dedicated to Isis and Serapis, remained the most important evidence of the presence of Egyptian cults among the Romans.

But the encounter of the two religions did not pass smoothly, and Caesar barely favored the gods of Egypt. Virgil (70–19 BCE) and Horace (65–8 BCE) described the battle of monstrous divinities, as Anubis brandished his arms against Neptune, Venus, and Minerva.

Ovid (43–17/18 BCE) saw things in a more flattering light. The cult of Isis was tolerated in Rome, and Nero (37–66 CE) introduced some Isiac feast days in the Roman calendar. Marcus Aurelius (161–180 CE) constructed a temple for the Egyptian Hermes.

In the second century CE the *Pax Romana* established peace throughout the Mediterranean world. In this era, we find a veritable passion for past civilizations: the Hindus, Persians, Chaldeans, and above all the Egyptians. Fascinated by Egyptian temples that were still in operation, rich Romans flocked to the land of the pharaohs. Apuleius, a Latin writer intrigued by the mysteries, also went there. In *The Golden Ass* he described for us the Egyptian mysteries in his colorful manner.

Alchemy, Magic, and Astrology

Along with alchemy, magic and astrology assumed greater importance. Claudius Ptolemy (ca. 90–ca.168 CE), a Greek living in Alexandria, wrote the *Tetrabiblos*, a treatise that codified all the principles of Greek astrology (with Egyptian and Chaldean influences): signs, houses, aspects, elements. Ptolemy was not merely an astrologer, he was also an astronomer to whom we owe geocentrism and the theory of the epicycles which dominated science until the seventeenth century CE. It was Ptolemy who transmitted Greek astronomical knowledge to the West. Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–ca. 213 CE), a Greek church father, drew in his *Stromateis* a portrait of the Egyptian astrologers of his time who always had to be ready to recite the four astrological books of Hermes.

Olympiodorus (fifth or sixth century CE) presented alchemy as a sacerdotal art practiced by the Egyptians. The Leiden and Stockholm papyri (second century CE) depict the metallurgical procedures as effectively being linked to magical formulas.⁵ In the third century CE, Zosimos of Panopolis settled down in Alexandria so as to dedicate himself to alchemy. The first well-known alchemical author, he bestowed upon this science his

concepts and symbolism. But his alchemical writings do not simply revolve around laboratory work; they also discuss the transformations of the soul and entail a mystical quest. Alchemy expanded so greatly in the third century CE that Emperor Diocletian, disturbed by a possible devaluation of precious metals, promulgated an edict prohibiting the practice and condemning alchemical texts to the flames.

Neoplatonism

Neoplatonists were considerably interested in Egypt. Iamblichus (ca. 240–ca. 325 CE), who was initiated into the Chaldean, Egyptian, and Syrian rites, is an enigmatic individual. Some extraordinary powers were attributed to the “divine Iamblichus,” the head of a Neoplatonist school. While in prayer, his body was said to rise more than ten cubits from the earth, and his skin and clothing were bathed in a beautiful golden light.

Egypt held a chosen spot in his writings. In *De Mysteriis* (On the Egyptian Mysteries),⁶ Iamblichus presented himself in the guise of Abammon, a master of the Egyptian sacerdotal hierarchy and an interpreter of Hermetic teachings. He also promoted theurgy and Egyptian divinatory practices. A little later, another Neoplatonist, Proclus (412–485 CE), also strongly affected by theurgy, believed himself to be part of the “chain of Hermes.” He had great influence on Sufism and on such Christian thinkers as Johannes Scotus Erigena, Meister Eckhart, and many others.

Nevertheless, this era saw Egypt fading away before an ever-expanding Christianity. Alexandria played an important role in the

many controversies that marked the beginnings of this religion newly imposed by Constantine. In the third century CE, the Egyptians abandoned hieroglyphs and adopted the Coptic script for transcribing their language. The Copts adapted the secret knowledge of the pharaohs to Christianity. Soon afterwards, Emperor Theodosius promulgated an edict against non-Christian cults, thus marking the end of the Egyptian clergy and their ceremonies.

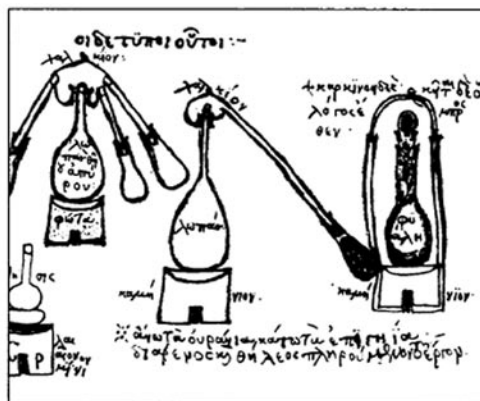
The Christians Before Hermes

Christianity, which began to gain in influence, was not unaware of Hermes. In the middle of the second century CE a kind of Christian Hermes appeared in the pages of a book entitled *The Shepherd*, whose author was said to be Hermas.⁷ It is a Roman work in which Hermas, the “messenger of penance and penitent,” took the form of a prophet. *The Shepherd* is an apocalyptic work in which

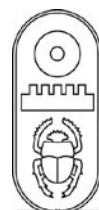
all the conventions of the genre are found. In the early Church Jesus is often presented as a shepherd, a role that is also attributed to Hermes. Yet in this instance it is not Jesus that Hermes designates, but the “angel of the penance.” Considered for a long time to be an integral part of the canonical scriptures, *The Shepherd* passed to the status of apocryphal scripture at

the beginning of the fourth century.

The Church fathers generally loved to delve into mythology so as to disclose the beginnings of the Gospel. Hermes Trismegistus continued to garner respect among them. Lactantius (250–325 CE), in his *Divinarum Institutionum* (Divine Institutions), saw Christian truth formulated before the advent of Christianity in the



Alambics and vases for digestion, in *Symosius*, a Greek alchemical manuscript (National Library, Paris), taken from *Collection des anciens alchimistes grecs*. (Collection of Ancient Greek Alchemists), by M. Berthelot.



Corpus Hermeticum. He placed Hermes Trismegistus in the first rank of Gentile prophets who foresaw the coming of Christ.

St. Augustine (354–430 CE), the Father of the Church, in his *City of God*, a fundamental treatise of Christian theology, made Hermes a descendent of God. He had read the *Asclepius* in the translation by Apuleius of Madaura, but even though he admired Hermes Trismegistus, he rejected the magic revealed in this work. Clement of Alexandria liked to compare Hermes-Logos to the Christ-Logos.

Emperor Julian the Apostate (361–363 CE), the nephew of Constantine, attempted a brief return to the worship of the mysteries. He enacted measures against Christians and restored paganism. Influenced by Neoplatonism, he extolled ancient theurgy. This return was brief, however, and by 387 CE the Christian patriarch Theophilus undertook the destruction of the Egyptian temples with the idea of transforming them into places of Christian worship. Nonetheless, on the island of Philae an Egyptian temple continued to function. It was not closed until 551 CE, by order of Emperor Justinian.

It will be noted that the Egyptian temples remained active between the first and sixth centuries CE—that is, during the period which covers the composition of the *Hermetica*. It is often remarked that these texts are pessimistic regarding the future of the Egyptian religion, which leads us to think that they were written in an Egyptian setting by a priestly class. Fragments from the Egyptian wisdom may repose in the *Hermetica*, but they are expressed in an indirect fashion, having been submitted to the process of Hellenization.

Alexandria had been the starting point where Egyptian teachings entered the Greek and Roman worlds. It was where the ancient tradition was reformulated by way of alchemy, astrology, and magic. This point of departure, after having scattered such wisdom into a greater portion of the East, was already

disappearing by the sixth century CE, and the Arabs now took up the torch.

The Sabaeans

Alexandria was seized by the Arabs in 642 CE, a date which marks an end to this city's days of glory. However, the conquest of this city was not the Arabs' first encounter with esotericism. Rather, they had been aware of Hermes long before this time. For example, they had learned from the Sabaeans, inhabitants of the mythical kingdom of Sheba, which was supposed to be a place of earthly paradise. In ancient times it was also called *Arabia Felix* (Happy Arabia) and was said to be the land of the phoenix. Centuries later Christian Rosenkruz was supposed to have visited the area so as to gather together the marvelous knowledge deposited there. The Bible states that the queen of this land, the queen of Sheba, visited King Solomon. Although the location of her land was not specified in the Old Testament, the Koran indicates that it was in southern Arabia (modern-day Yemen).

The Sabaeans were notable astrologers, and Maimonides indicated that this knowledge assumed a predominant role among them. Tradition claims that the magi who greeted Christ came from this legendary land. The Sabaeans possessed both the Hermetic alchemical writings and the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Being knowledgeable in such subjects, it is they who introduced science into Islam, although they themselves evolved on the fringes of this religion.

The Sabaeans claimed to have originated with Hermes to whom they dedicated a special cult. They produced some books whose contents, they claimed, had been revealed by Hermes, such as the *Risalat fi'n-nafs* (Letter about the Soul) and the *Liturgical Institutions of Hermes* by Thabit ibn Qurrah, an eminent figure of Sabaeism in Baghdad (ca. 836–901 CE).

Idris-Hermes

The seventh century CE signaled the beginnings of Islam. Although the Koran did

not make any reference to Hermes, the hagiographers of Islam's early centuries identified the prophet Idris, mentioned in the Koran, with Hermes and Enoch. This assimilation helped to link Islam with Greco-Egyptian traditions. In Islam, Idris-Hermes is described as both a prophet and a timeless personage. He is sometimes compared to al-Khadir,⁸ the mysterious intermediary and sage who initiated Moses and who plays a fundamental role in Sufism as a manifestation of the personal guide.

Abu-Ma'shar, an eighth century CE Persian astrologer who became celebrated in Europe by the name of Albumazar, drew up an account tracing the genealogy of Hermes. This text, which had immense influence in the Islamic world, distinguished three successive Hermes. The first, Hermes Major, lived before the Flood. Identified with Thoth, he is described as the civilizer of humanity, as he had the pyramids constructed and engraved the sacred hieroglyphs for future generations. The second Hermes lived in Babylonia after the Flood; he was a master of medicine, philosophy, and mathematics. He was also the initiator of Pythagoras. Finally, the third Hermes is described as having continued his predecessors' work of civilizing society. As a master of occult knowledge, he transmitted alchemy to humanity.

The Emerald Tablet

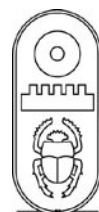
In the same era there appeared the *Emerald Tablet*, a text which assumed an important place in the tradition. The oldest known version, in Arabic, dates from the sixth century CE. Many are those who cite this text without really knowing it; therefore, we feel that it would be useful to present it in its entirety.

True, without falsehood, certain and most true, that which is below is like that which is above, and that which is above is like that which is below for accomplishing the wonder of the one thing. As all things are created from one, by the will and command of the one United who created it, so all things

are born from this one thing by dispensation and union. Its father is the sun, its mother is the moon, the wind carries it in its belly, its nurse is the earth. This is the father of all perfection in this whole world. Its power is perfect when it is changed into earth; so you should separate the earth from the fire, and the subtle from the thick or gross but lovingly with great understanding and discretion. It ascends from earth to heaven and from heaven again to earth and receives again the power of the Above and the Below. Thus you will have the splendor of the whole world. All lack of understanding and lack of ability will leave you. This is of all power the most powerful power, for it can overcome all subtlety and can penetrate all that is solid. Thus was the world created. Thus many rare combinations originated, and wonders are wrought, of which this is the way to work. And thus I am called Trismegistus, having the three parts of the wisdom of the whole world. All that I have said concerning the work of the sun is fulfilled.⁹

This work is attributed to Apollonius of Tyana, a philosopher and thaumaturgist of the first century CE. As Julius Ruska has shown, the text comes to us through the translation composed by Sagiyyus, a Christian priest of Nablus. It appears in *Kitab Sirr Al-Haliqa* (The Secret Book of Creation) by Balinus (the Arabic translation of the name Apollonius).¹⁰

In this book, Apollonius relates how he discovered the tomb of Hermes. He claims to have found in this sepulcher an old man, seated on a throne, holding an emerald-colored tablet upon which appeared the text of the famed *Emerald Tablet*. Before him was a book explaining the secrets of the creation of beings and the knowledge of the causes for all things. This narrative would recur much later in the *Fama Fraternitatis*.



Arab Alchemy

The role of the Arabs as transmitters of alchemy to the West in the Middle Ages is generally well known. They also left us with a vocabulary distinctive to this art (*al kemia*, chemistry; *al tanur*, athanor; etc.). Yet Islam's role is not simply limited to that of transmission, as the Arabs conceptualized it in a form which, afterwards, was to assert itself everywhere.¹¹ Their alchemy was not only an art of the laboratory, it was also meant to unveil the hidden laws of Creation, and it comprised a mystic and philosophical dimension. Although Arab alchemy claimed to be of Egyptian origin, its practice occurred after the Arab conquest of Egypt in 639 CE. They received Greek alchemy through the Syrians, but their first masters in this art were the Persians, who had inherited the Mesopotamian esoteric traditions.

The first known Arab alchemist, the Umayyad prince Khalid ibn Yazid (?–704 CE), was initiated by Morienus, a Christian of Alexandria. Within a short time alchemy spread throughout the Islamic world and the Greek treatises were quickly translated. The most illustrious figure of Arab alchemy was Jabir ibn Hayyan (died ca. 815 CE), known in the Western world as Geber. He advanced the fundamental concepts of the great work, and his reflections led to a spiritual alchemy on a grand scale. He is also credited with numerous discoveries in alchemy.

The Jabirian Corpus is said to contain more than 3,000 treatises, most of which are apocryphal. They were probably the work of a school which formed around his teachings. Arab alchemy had many masters, of whom we will mention only a few: abu-Bakr Muhammad ibn-Zakariya', called al-Razi or Rhazes (850–923 CE); Muhammad ibn-Umail al-Tamimi, called Zaidith the Elder (tenth century); abd Allah al-Jaldaki (fourteenth century). Before long their texts penetrated Europe

through Spain and profoundly affected the Latin West.

Magic and Astrology

Magic also occupied a central position in Arab spirituality. Islam made use of magical letters, much like the Hebrew Qabalah, for penetrating the Koran's secrets. Moreover, Arab magic, which Christian Rosenkreuz informed us much later was none too pure, encompassed a wide range: astrology, medicine, talismans, etc. Astrology was ever-present in the Islamic world. Although suspect due to its pagan origins, it developed significantly from the eighth century, when the *Tetrabiblos* of Ptolemy was translated into Arabic.

Astrology, in the era of al-Mansur, the second Abbassid caliph (754–775 CE), was not only indebted to the Greeks, but also came under the influence of the Hindus, Syrian Christians, Judeo-Arameans, and undoubtedly the Essenes. In general, the various esoteric teachings played a fundamental role in Islam, particularly in the Shi'ite environment, as shown by Henry Corbin.¹² It is easy to understand why Christian Rosenkreuz came to the Arab lands to gather the essential elements from which he was to construct the Rosicrucian Order.

Eastern Theosophy

Around the ninth century ibn-Wahshiya, in a treatise entitled *The Knowledge of the Occult Unveiled*,¹³ presented many occult alphabets attributed to Hermes. He also made reference to the four classes of Egyptian priests descended from Hermes. Those who belonged to the third class—that is, the children of Hermes Trismegistus' sister—he called *Ishraqiyun* (“of the East”). Some years later, Sohrevardi (?–1191), one of the greatest Islamic mystics of Persia, revived the expression *Ishraqiyun* (signifying “Eastern theosophists”) to describe the masters who had experienced Illumination. Philosophy and the mystical experience were inseparable in his mind, and in his *Book of Oriental Wisdom*¹⁴ he described the chain of past initiates, the Eastern theosophists.

For him this experience was tied to Hermes, whom he made the ancestor, the father of the sages. These ecstatic philosophers, described as the “Pillars of Wisdom,” were Plato, Empedocles, Pythagoras, Zoroaster, and Mohammed. What makes Sohrawardi particularly interesting is that, in contrast to the authors we have discussed until now, he did not seek to establish a historical human filiation between Hermes and the sages of the different traditions, but a celestial initiatory filiation based on inner experiences.

The heritage left by Hermes Trismegistus is manifold. Its treasures (alchemy, magic,

and astrology) constitute essential elements of traditional esotericism and have traversed many civilizations. Nonetheless, the latter have always considered Egypt to be the Mother of all traditions. In the Middle Ages, this ancient heritage penetrated the West, and by the time of the Renaissance it took on a new aspect in constituting what is generally called “Western esotericism.” It then developed in a special way so as to reach a critical threshold on the brink of the publication of the Rosicrucian manifestos.



Endnotes:

¹ Bernard Gorceix, *La Bible des Rose-Croix, traduction et commentaire des trois premiers écrits rosicruciens* (1614-1615-1616) (Paris: PUF, 1970), 17.

² Antoine Faivre, *Accès de l'ésotérisme occidental* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 33. English edition: *Access to Western Esotericism*, vol. 1 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994); and *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition: Studies in Western Esotericism*, vol. 2 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).

³ Erik Hornung, *L'Égypte ésotérique, le savoir occulte des Égyptiens et son influence en Occident* (Monaco: Éditions du Rocher, 2001), 27. English edition: *The Secret Lore of Egypt: Its Impact on the West* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

⁴ Hermes Trismegistus, trans. André-Jean Festugière, vols. 1-4 (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1946-1954). See also A.-J. Festugière, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, vol. 1, “L'astrologie et les sciences occultes;” vol. 2, “Le Dieu cosmique;” vol. 3, “Les doctrines de l'âme, le Dieu inconnu de la gnose” (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1950). English editions of the *Hermetica* include: *Hermetica: the Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a new English Translation*, trans. Brian P. Copenhaver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); *The Way of Hermes*, trans. Clement Salaman et al. (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2000); and *Hermetica*, ed. and trans. Walter Scott, 4 vols. (New York: Shambala, 1985).

⁵ Regarding the Greek alchemists, see Marcellin Berthelot, *Collection des anciens alchimistes grecs* (Paris: G. Steinheil, 1887-1888). Regarding the history of alchemy, see Robert Halleux, *Les Textes alchimiques* (Turhout, Belgium: Brépols, 1979).

⁶ Iamblichus, *Les Mystères d'Égypte*, ed. and trans. Édouard des Places, S.J., Correspondant de l'Institut (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1966). English edition: Iamblichus, *On The Mysteries*, trans. Emma C. Clarke et al. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).

⁷ Hermas, Le Pasteur, with Introduction and Notes by Robert Joly (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, coll. “Sources chrétiennes,” no. 53 bis, 1997). English edition: Carolyn Osiek, *Shepherd of Hermas: A Commentary (Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible)*, ed. Helmut Koester (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

⁸ Corbin, Henry, *L'Imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn Arabi* (Paris: Aubier, 1993), 32, 49-59, 73, and 77. English editions: *Creative imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi*, trans.

Ralph Manheim (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969); and *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi*, with a new Preface by Harold Bloom (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

⁹ Translation from the Latin Vulgate of the 14th century. Variants of this text (in Arab, Latin, and French) may be found, along with Hortulanus' *Commentary* (Hortulanus, 14th century) and a translation of Apollonius of Tyana's *Book of the Secret of Creation* (Pseudo-Apollonius of Tyana, *Kitab Sirr al-khaliqah*), in Hermes Trismegistus, *La Table d'Émeraude et sa tradition alchimique*, with Preface by Didier Kahn (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1994). English edition of Hortulanus: *The Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus*, including the Commentary of Hortulanus, trans. Patrick J. Smith, Alchemical Studies Series 5 (Edmonds, WA: The Alchemical Press - Holmes Publishing, 1997).

¹⁰ Julius Ruska, *Tabula Smaragdina, Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der hermetischen Literatur* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1926). Concerning this text see also Françoise Hudry, “*De Secretis Naturae* du PS. – Apollonius de Tyane, traduction latine par Hugues de Santala du *Kitab Sirr Al-Haliqa*,” *Chrysopoëia of the Société d'étude de l'histoire de l'alchimie: Cinq traités alchimiques médiévaux: Ps.-Apollonius de Tyane (Balinus): De secretis naturae (Kitab sirr al-haliqa); Ps.-Arnaud de Villeneuve: De secretis naturae; Flos florum (Le livre de Roussinus); Valerand du Bois-Robert: Épître à Madame de Bourgogne; Épître à Maître Abraham* (Paris: S.E.H.A.; Milan: Archè, 2000); *Chrysopoëia* Tome 6, 1997-1999, with Notes and Introduction by Sylvain Matton, 1-20; and Hermes Trismegistus, *La Table d'Émeraude*, with Preface by Didier Kahn (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1994).

¹¹ Pierre Lory, *Alchimie et mystique en terre d'Islam* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1989). Concerning this subject also see Georges C. Anawati, “L'alchimie arabe,” and Robert Halleux, “La réception de l'alchimie arabe en Occident,” in *Histoire des sciences arabes*, t. III, *Technologie, alchimie et sciences de la vie*, under the direction of Rashed Roshdi, Paris, Le Seuil, (1997): 111-141 and 143-154.

¹² Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971).

¹³ *La Magie arabe traditionnelle*, with Preface by Sylvain Matton (Paris: Retz, coll. “Bibliotheca Hermetica,” 1977).

¹⁴ Sohrawardi (Suhrawardi, Yahyá ibn Habash), *Le Livre de la Sagesse orientale*, ed. Christian Jamet, trans. Henry Corbin (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1986).

